



Mathilda Imagined It by Mrsflamboyant

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Summary: Mathilda accidentally awakens a slumbering Pennywise and falls for his human incarnation, the dashing but mysterious Mr. Robert Gray. She undertakes a terrifying and quixotic pursuit to stop Pennywise and prove to herself that he is real.

1. Summoning Mr Gray

Disclaimer: I do NOT own IT or any of the characters. Stephen King does. I only take credit for my OC.

A/N: My first fanfic, so please feel welcome to review and help improve my burgeoning writing style.

Cheers!

At the vulnerable age of 10, Mathilda felt safest when she wore her green footed pajamas. She imagined the zipped-up onesie made her the mightiest of all the Mesozoic beasts in her new encyclopedia set. And after stepping out of the claw footed tub and toweling off, her lanky 4' 5" frame was reborn as a 40-foot-long flesh-eating lizard that lacks the most basic human instinct – fear.

"Who says I'm too big for fleece footies and a larger-than-life imagination?" she struck a defiant pose, placing her hands on her hips. "Those fuddy-duddy adults." Mathilda answered before she bore her braced teeth and practiced a serpentine growl in the fogged-up floor length mirror.

Padding softly in a circle, she playfully hunched her back, curled her fingers and tested her new gait on the slippery linoleum tiles. A bit unbalanced with the weight of her invisible tail. "Tilly, you have five minutes!"

And just like that, Mathilda was yanked from her fantasy and transported back to her irritable aunt's run-down brownstone bungalow. "I'm already done bathing, mom!" She called from behind the closed bathroom door. "And I'm ready for this." She said quietly, to the mirror.

Her late uncle's funeral was at 8 am sharp tomorrow morning. She'd never met him, nor her aunt Valarie before his untimely death. They were estranged, but tragedy always seemed to bring the family together again. Her parents scheduled the return flight to Seattle at noon. Only have one night away from home, thank goodness.

Portland, Maine has its share of creepy stories.

The old Mathilda couldn't handle sleeping in a new bedroom without snuggling up to her mom's safety and warmth, but luckily dinosaurs are cold-blooded solitary creatures unfazed by long and lonely nights. Dinosaurs, unlike children, aren't afraid of the dark.

The steam curled around her and clung to her skin as she opened the heavy bathroom door and ventured into the cold and dimly lit hallway. Her eyes scanned the walls for something reassuring, but the smiling people in the framed pictures were all ugly and unfamiliar.

Their pallid faces and crooked smiles seem to follow her movements as she swiftly tip-toe T. Rex style to the third door on the right. She found her parents peeling back the dusty comforter of their full-sized bed. Hardly enough space for a third, smaller person.

"Can I sleep in the bed with you guys?" Mathilda's resolve wavered. "Not tonight, I'm afraid," Her mom answered without looking up from smoothing out the musty duvet. She wrinkled her nose at the unpleasant smell. "Valarie didn't make a fuss over our visit, did she, Mike?" Mike briefly glanced up at his wife, matching her annoyed expression. "She doesn't pay the same attention to detail as you, dear. Especially after Emmett passed."

"Uh huh." Her mom refocused her attention to her daughter leaning dejectedly on the doorframe. "Let's go have a look at your room, Tilly. Valarie insists that she has the perfect space just for kids." Her smile waned, growing thinner like her patience.

Mathilda fell in step behind her mom, arriving at another room down the hall. As they peered inside, the smell of black licorice and stale cigarettes assaulted Mathilda's senses. "Ummm, the bedroom looks great mom." She didn't attempt to conceal her disappointment, glancing around at the yellowed, peeling wallpaper.

"It really is ... perfect."

The windowless room was claustrophobically small and spartanly furnished with a bed, a neatly clothed coat rack, and a nightstand topped with a standing brass picture frame and a reclining porcelain

clown doll.

"This house," Valarie's crisp agitated voice unexpectedly booms behind them, "was built in 1866, nearly eight months after the Great fire. Much of the lumber and furnishings were imported from nearby Derry. Thousands lost their homes and countless drifters made their way through these rooms looking for a temporary respite." she finished.

Mathilda's attention was focused squarely on the solid pine coat rack in the corner; it held a weather-worn bowler on the top rung and a matching men's waistcoat. Her aunt and mother's presence fades away as she walked further into the room, dazed and drawn in by an unseen presence.

Extending her fingers out to touch the jacket's left pocket, she gently touched the rough fabric. It felt stiff from old age and neglect, but she tentatively reached inside. Empty. How disappointing.

Wait a minute, a name 'R. Gray' was stitched on the interior. Mathilda glanced over to the sepia toned photograph on the nightstand and immediately focused on the guarded expression of a stunning young man in the foreground.

"Some antiques were left behind when Emmett and I purchased this house 30 years ago," Valarie recited on cue, "we tried to preserve the historical integrity by keeping things as they were."

Picking up the portrait, Mathilda noted that this man's dark hair was slicked back and even though he wasn't smiling, his far-set eyes did not look unkind. He held a rounded bowler at his side and wore the very same jacket she lightly fingered just seconds ago.

"You must be Mr. Gray." She grinned.

As her curious eyes scanned the background for clues about this stranger, she noticed a row of busy concession booths and a costumed juggler. "Must've been a carny." She shrugged. And for just a moment as she held the delicate frame, Mathilda could smell the popcorn and cotton candy and she could hear the fanfare. The picture itself looked animated for a single second.

The clown doll stared blankly ahead. Its once brilliant silver outfit dull and stained. "Do you belong to Mr. Gray?" She picked up the doll, examining the frayed lace, lose elastic, and faded red pom-poms.

"Alright. Lights Out." Mathilda's mom announced, interrupting her careful ministrations.

"Time to let go of your fears." She whispered while placing the doll back down.

She lifted her slight frame on her scaly talons and slowly closed the gap between the nightstand and the bed. 'Dinosaurs are unafraid. Dinosaurs are unafraid. Dinosaurs...' She repeated in her mind with each step. Right before she heard the click of the light switch, Mathilda locked eyes with Mr. Gray once more.

"Goodnight, Tilly." Her mom and aunt quietly exited the room together and gently closed the door behind them, leaving her in what felt like a sensory deprivation chamber. There was so sound, no light. The old floorboards and walls made nary a creak or complaint as she closed her eyes.

Sometime during the night, Mathilda was awoken by her restless mind. She turned to look where the aged photograph – where Mr. Gray still stood on the nightstand, somewhere in the darkness – but a movement she couldn't exactly see, but could hear and feel caught her attention.

She sat up suddenly at the quick pitter patter of tiny feet running past the bed. A cool wisp of air stroked her cheek, drawing her attention to the coat rack.

Someone giggled at a helium-high pitch. 'Please let it be my imagination.' She screamed internally as she desperately tried to adjust her eyes to the darkness. "Whose there?"

The jacket stirred, slightly at first. Mathilda eyes must be playing tricks on her.

The once flaccid arms suddenly jerked forward, filling out and taking shape. The buttoned-down chest took an exaggerated breath in and

out. In and out again.

She gasped as a cartoonishly large ginger topped head emerged from the collar, as if blown up like a balloon underneath the hanging hat. Long, spindly legs unfurled and lowered themselves from beneath the jacket's torso and two large feet hit the floor with an unceremonious 'thud.'

Slender goved hands lifted the hat, and a white painted visage just like the doll's face grinned back, revealing two childlike bucked teeth.

Its mouth opened widely and out came a shrill cackle. Mathilda was frozen; her hands and feet frost-bitten with fear. At this moment she was not a carnivorous predator. She was a scared little girl once again.

Mathilda's breath hitched and she squeaked, unable to find her voice. "Mmmommy" she choked, "Come help me." Tears run silently down the sides of her face and collected under her chin.

It unhooked its back from the second highest rung and stood at its full height, towering over her at nearly seven feet tall. "Would you like to visit the circus, little Tilly?" It knelt and whispered in her ear. She could smell its sickly-sweet breath as it spoke softly at her side, tickling the hairs on the nape of her neck. "Your fear can summon me, and I will help you float." Her face contorted grotesquely and she screamed.

The door slammed open, making a doorknob sized dent in the wall. Mike flipped the lightswitch and It was gone. Mathilda sat upright in the bed, wearing the brown bowler and wildly pointing at the coat rack.

Twenty years and 45 talk-therapy sessions later and still nobody believes Mathilda's account – even she is beginning to doubt the incredulous memory she's retold countless times.

"Yes, I'm asking for those three specific antiques from auntie's estate sale," her official business voice reverberates through the small Belltown-based apartment. "Have them shipped overnight if possible. Mmmhmm. Thanks."

Mathilda hangs up and her shoulders slump forward as she releases the breath she didn't know she was holding. "I know It's real."

She goes over the list again: Flashlights? Check, Taser? Check, Novelty adult-sized footed pajamas? Double-check.

"We'll meet again soon Mr. Gray."

2. Welcome to the Emerald City

"Mr. Fox, Mr. Fox, what time is it Mr. Fox?" The children shouted in unison. Mathilda stood with her back to her classmates at the front of the gymnasium. "11 o'clock!" she called out without turning to face the other players. Each child took eleven small steps closer to Mathilda, giggling with anticipation. "Mr. Fox, Mr. Fox, what time is it Mr. Fox?"

Mathilda grinned widely, turned on her sneakered heels and shouted "Midnight!"

She chased after the players, zigging and zagging, snapping and growling – envisioning each squealing child was a white cottontail rabbit (although nearly all were at least a head taller than she). "I got you! And you!" she tagged her friends, turning them into foxes to join her at the front line for another round. The school bell rang, signaling the end of third grade gym class and one of her favorite memories.

Mathilda reluctantly pulled herself from her daydream to answer the doorbell.

She descended the carpeted stairs from her bedroom loft and made her way to the front door catching a quick glimpse of the cityscape through the small window opposite the staircase. The coffeeshop, fire station, and monorail tracks were still standing. Normalcy was reassuring.

"Yes, who is it?" Mathilda asked without opening the door.

"You have a large package at the front desk. It's taking up space in the mailroom so I brought it to you." Every luxury apartment should come with a petite concierge named Amy. She was always considerate and willing to perform duties beyond her job title.

"Oh I'm sorry, here let me sign for that." Mathilda apologized while opening the front door. She nearly slammed directly into the 6-foot tall box on her concrete stoop. Amy pushed the package into her living room with the handcart and exited with a cheery, "all done," leaving Mathilda alone with her claim to her aunt's estate sale.

She wasted no time finding the scissors and carefully sliced the packing tape on the left side of the upright standing box. When it opened, she pulled out three smaller bubble wrapped packages and set them aside. There it is. That damned coatrack. It looked older, but no less intimidating in the daytime. Mathilda set it carefully between the couch and entryway and opened the rounded package next. It was the hat and jacket; both looked worse for wear. She placed them on the rungs exactly as she remembered. Next came the smallest package.

"Hello old friend. You look well considering your age." She sat Mr. Gray's picture on the end table next to the coatrack.

"And what's this?" She unfolded the brown paper, uncovering the little Victorian clown doll. "How could I have forgotten about you?" she admonished herself, "after all, I suppose you complete the spell." She leaned the clown against the picture frame and went back upstairs to gather her courage for tonight. She planned to call forth Mr. Gray at the stroke of midnight.

At 10 o'clock Mathilda was too agitated to perform her nightly regimen. "I should record whatever happens," she paced back and forth in the living room, "then I'll have my proof to show everyone." She stopped suddenly. "Then I can destroy the clothes and doll."

Thirty minutes before midnight, Mathilda sat on the stairs next to the light switch. She had her taser in hand and two small LED flashlights in her pajama pocket. "Should've bought a holster."

One minute to go, and she felt cold and clammy down her back. No turning back now. Her cellphone alarm buzzed and she flipped the switch. All was silent. How strange for downtown Seattle. No dogs barking, no fire engines wailing, no cars passing, just nothing. She pressed the video record button and waited.

"I'm so sorry, I can't do this!" Mathilda suddenly panicked and turned on the light.

She steadied her breathing and looked up. "The clown's gone." She nearly turned and ran up the stairs, but two hands firmly caught her waist.

"The fragrant smell of your fear hasn't changed ...Tilly." His raspy voice vibrated against her eardrum. She felt warm droplets of saliva slide down her collarbone. "Is this real enough for you?" One gloved hand took the cellphone and held it up to take a selfie of them both.

"Am I real enough for you?" The phone's camera feature flashed twice without him visibly pressing the button.

"Yes." Mathilda squeaked. "You always were, Mr. Gray." His grip loosened.

"But who are you really? What are you?" She said shakily, grabbing the banister and turning to face her waking nightmare. He is larger than she remembers. 'Wait, where is my taser?' both hands are empty and her mind is racing.

Mathilda backs down a step. Two more until she can run straight to the front door if need be.

There was a pregnant pause.

She thought about tearing the jacket on her way out to ensure his demise before she returned home. If only she could rip the head off the missing toy.

"I am Pennywise, the dancing clown." He stooped forward in a sweeping mock bow and his smile grew predatory.

"And I'm in over my head." Mathilda looked over her shoulder to run towards the door, but instead of two remaining steps, the staircase had grown by a thousand or more vertigo inducing narrow stairs leading down into nothingness. She felt an upwards jerk. An escalator? Her staircase was now a beige carpeted escalator! Pennywise doubled over cackling, nearly choking on his drool.

"You'll go up, Up, UP!" He laughed, leaning into her face.

"You'll float too." Their noses almost touched.

"Nooo!" Mathilda screamed and tried to push him back, but as she turned to make her way down the ascending stairs, Pennywise stepped directly on her green footie.

"Oops," he pursed his lips, feigning remorse. "Dinosaurs must have poor balance."

She felt herself fall forward, heavy and fast. Anticipating the impact of countless stairs, Mathilda tried to tuck her head under her body.

SLAM. The sudden impact of her living room floor connecting with her face made her ears ring. "Mmmnnnggg." She pulled her head up and through blurred vision she saw the blood pooling on the floorboards beneath her. "My nose." She mumbled through the pain. Broken.

Pennywise was gone, but the doll had been returned. Mathilda crawled forward to twist that porcelain head right off, but noticed her phone had been placed next to it.

She picked it up and looked at the last picture taken. It was just her, an unflattering out-of-focus picture of her scared sobbing face.

"Of course."

3. Take me Home

Mathilda felt the fire in the pit of her stomach rise into her throat. She hadn't eaten anything since last night's reunion with whatever the hell it is, but she heaved again and a strong cocktail of stomach acid, fear and misery was jettisoned into the toilet.

It was already noon on a Wednesday, but she couldn't steady her nerves enough to face her responsibilities to ensure her clients' wellbeing. She called in sick to work this morning feigning a more tangible illness that would render her useless until next Monday. And subsequently felt the heavy guilt of abandoning her post at one of Seattle's most shoe-strapped nonprofits.

"I'll have to come up with something to explain my broken nose to my boss," she groaned, staring at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Mathilda looked peaked and her tired eyes were weighed down by dark bags from her 3 am visit to the downtown Urgent Care Clinic. Luckily neither the bone, nor cartilage was knocked out of position; she wouldn't need a splint. A sob almost made its way past her lips, but she swallowed it.

"It was a mistake to open Pandora's Box. I just have to fix this before midnight." Mathilda hadn't made complete sense of the rules for his return so she acted fast on intuition. She ran to the entryway and grabbed the doll, making her way through the living room. Its heavy head lolled to the side. "Aaahhhh!" The flesh on her palm sizzled. Mathilda moaned, clutching her hand. The doll dropped to the floor and out of anger and frustration she kicked it away.

Exhausted and unsteady on her feet, she stomped back to the entryway, grabbed the bowler hat on the coatrack and tripped over the sharp edge of the coffee table. She wobbled into the kitchen and rummaged through the 'miscellaneous' drawer. "There you are!" She clutched the candle lighter with determination and made a quick detour to remove the batteries from the smoke detector.

Mathilda returned to the bathroom and flung the hat into her tub. She opened the sink cabinet, ignoring the avalanche of hair and face products spilling onto the floor. "Not here." She grumbled under her

breath.

She opened the medicine cabinet, released a sigh of relief and yanked out the nail polish remover. Mathilda felt a heady, almost weightless glee from the combination of sleep deprivation and revenge and almost laughed as she poured the highly flammable acetone over the bowler. She knelt beside the bathtub and held down the lighter's ignition switch. "Here goes everything." She lit the hat and watched as it was quickly engulfed in flames.

Once she was certain that the damage was enough to render the hat useless, Mathilda turned on the shower, quelling the flames and hopefully weakening the clown. The thought of his power waning calmed her just enough to take an unsettled catnap before the sun set behind the skyscrapers surrounding her apartment.

Mathilda was awoken by a cacophony of police and ambulance sirens and a loud knock on her front door. She jerked awake, still groggy, and jogged down the stairs catching a glimpse of the red and blue flashing lights from her window. She opened the door, "Yes?" A police officer stood on her stoop. She stepped out into the chilly October air and closed the door behind her.

"Good evening Miss, I'm very sorry to inform you that there's been an incident involving one of the apartment complex's staff members." The officer paused to answer the static from his walkie talkie. "Excuse me?" Mathilda furrowed her brow.

He cleared his throat. "We're asking every resident if they might have any information about what happened earlier this afternoon. Do you know a Mrs. Amy Park?" Her heart felt two tons heavier. "Yes. What's happened?"

"We believe Mrs. Park was headed to the mailroom near the lobby when she tried to use the freight elevator to transport some packages. The elevator doors opened, and she was unable to see over the cargo to know that the shaft was empty. She fell down two floors." He paused again to swallow the lump in his throat, "We don't believe the impact of the fall killed Mrs. Park. The elevator car was three floors above her, and although all the safety mechanisms were operational, the cord holding it up somehow failed...We're asking for any

information regarding a note recovered from the elevator, written by someone named Mr. Gray."

The sheer graphicness of the account, and the knowledge it may be connected to her actions brought Mathilda to her knees. "What did the note say?" She whispered. The officer gently held her shoulders she kneeled in front of her door.

"At this time we don't have a full knowledge of what it means." He pulled a miniature clipboard scribbled with notes out of his belt. "It reads, *More of Mr. Gray will wither away with every piece that's lost.* That's it." Mathilda lowered her head and kept her eyes glued to the ground. The officer's grip on her shoulders tightened. "I'm very sorry to deliver this news Miss, but unfortunately not everyone can float."

"What did you say?" Mathilda felt icy pinpricks that traveled up from her toes to the tips of her hair. Her breathing quickened as she slowly looked up at the officer's eyes only to find an unsettling delight. "I said, NOT EVERYONE CAN FLOAT, Tilly." She struggled to get out of his grasp, but he pulled her back. Despite the crowd around them no one seemed to notice the struggle taking place in plain sight.

He roughly grabbed her face with his left hand and squeezed hard. When he continued, his speech had morphed into the same high-pitched yet guttural, grainy voice as the demonic clown. "I should thank you, Tilly, for helping me let to chip, Chip, CHIP away at some of those nasty lingering feelings that come with living as a human for too long." He leaned in to place a sloppy kiss on her forehead. Mathilda was so weakened by her shame, she collapsed into his chest and closed her eyes. His grip loosened.

'I did this. Mr. Gray's human belongings are what tether him to this world. Once they're gone, he becomes more lethal.' Mathilda's mind raced. 'He wanted me to destroy the clothes. He wanted me to smash...No wait' She needed to get back inside the apartment without her expressive face revealing her intentions. 'Time to earn that Oscar.'

Mathilda took a few deep, steadying breaths. She looked up to see it was now the clown staring back at her. His face relaxed and smug. He smiled and her face crumbled. "I was so childish!" Mathilda

scolded herself. "I just wanted to prove to everyone that you're real." She searched his eyes for some hint of empathy or understanding. She found neither. "Now I can't take it back, I can't bring Amy back to her family!"

"What if you could bring me back?" His toothy smile widened. "What if you could put this aaaalllll behind you and carry on like it never happened?" He waved his white gloved hand in front of her face for emphasis. "I don't understand." Her bottom lip trembled. "Take my personal effects back to my original home in Derry." His command was slow and deliberate.

She feigned compliance. "I, I will. I promise. Just go away." Mathilda stood up as the clown knelt in front of her. And still not one bystander looked her way at what appeared to be a bizarre Cirque-themed proposal. "I'll schedule a flight out for tomorrow morning if I can. I'll have to put the coat rack in checked luggage or mail it ahead of us."

"You could use the mailroom," He teased, "I hear there's a vacancy." She ignored his taunt. "I'll get my laptop," she said, opening the front door. Once inside, Mathilda had no time to hesitate or second-guess her dangerous plan. Her eyes darted around the living room, trying to locate where she kicked the doll earlier; her hand stung with the memory. 'There it is!' halfway under the couch.

She lunged forward and grabbed its leg, careful to hold as little surface area as possible this time. Mathilda nearly slid across the floorboards as she sprinted to the bathroom. Almost there. The bathroom door slammed in front of her and instead of stopping she immediately changed her trajectory towards the kitchen – somehow knowing she needed to be just as unpredictable as the clown. She nearly overshot the sink.

Mathilda was on autopilot. She plugged the dirty dish-filled sink, haphazardly pushing aside coffee mugs and hardened cheese encrusted plates. She turned on the tap. It hammered loudly, but no water came out. 'Ok, plan C.' She opened the drawer of miscellaneous things and improvised. "Batteries? no. Envelopes? no. Phone charger? no. Screwdriver?" Mathilda raised the flathead above her head to smash the doll's head on the countertop.

"Silly Tilly." The palm of his hand connected with her left temple. She slammed headfirst into the refrigerator and slid ungraciously to the floor. "Aww, tsk tsk" he clicked his tongue and sauntered toward her as she sat holding the doll to her chest. Mathilda recovered quickly. She leaned forward just enough open the fridge door and placed the doll's head inside. He visibly shivered, taking a step back. His eyes were wide with fear. "Don't." he whispered.

Mathilda screamed as she slammed the door. The shiny forehead cracked. She opened the door a second time and slammed it harder again, and again. The clown staggered backwards, grabbing his head. A grisly gash extended from his receding hairline to his nonexistent eyebrows.

He dropped to the floor and writhed in pain, convulsing, kicking and chocking on spittle. Mathilda backed into the corner of the small kitchen. As the clown's wailing died down, his body started to glow. No, it started to shine brightly. Brilliant orange lights illuminated the apartment and Mathilda shielded her eyes. She felt the shock waves of what sounded like an explosion. A deafening silence followed. She opened her eyes and couldn't hold in her gasp.

He was tall. He was stunning. He was human. Stretched out on her kitchen floor, naked and vulnerable and covered in a cold sweat. If not for his pained expression and light, shallow breaths he would appear lifeless. Mathilda approached carefully. His eyelids twitched and opened, revealing unfocused green irises. Her own eyes travelled down his face, landing on his defined cheekbones and pink lips.

Then he grabbed her arms and pinned them at her sides.

"What did you do?" Robert Gray growled between clenched teeth.

4. To Err is Human

Mathilda thrashed against the cold kitchen floor. Robert was straddling her waist and snarling obscenities, his breath in her face as stifling hot as his rage. She couldn't move. Both her arms were pinned down by his massive hands. Despite the transformation his girth and physical strength were the same.

"I saved lives by weakening your power!" Mathilda sobbed before she stilled and turned her head to the side, resting her wet cheek on the smooth ceramic; the emotion behind his eyes made him appear all the more frightening and she couldn't face him. "You, you, what?" Robert spat, "You can't even save yourself!" He leaned back and shifted his weight to his knees. Mathilda looked up only after she felt the heaviness of his upper body ebb and his pained breaths soften.

He pointed his long index finger at her nose. "Get me back to Derry, and I'll leave you be." Despite the firmness of his demand, Robert looked defeated. Realizing that he couldn't back up his threat without his otherworldly abilities, he chuckled to himself, but there no humor behind his dry laugh.

His thoughts were interrupted by soft movements underneath his thighs. Robert looked down at Mathilda squirming and groaned, "The human body's physical needs are irksome at best."

Before she could decipher his intentions, he stood up and Mathilda averted her eyes, very aware of his nudity. He smirked at her discomfort and confidently strode past her curled form, making his way to the bathroom to relieve himself. Mathilda shakily rose to her feet and walked to the entryway where she gingerly picked up Robert's portrait. He emerged from the bathroom with a terry cloth towel wrapped loosely around his slender waist. He looked over her shoulder at his own face staring back.

"Were you always human before...you know?" He took the frame from her and placed it face down on the end table. "I am an entity older than the concept of time," he paused. "Do you have a cigarette?"

"What? No!" Mathilda scoffed, irritated by his nonchalant digression.

"Ok," he continued slowly, putting his hands up defensively, "I slept for centuries until I couldn't ignore the sweet, sweet scent of humankind's fear. As their civilizations grew, so did their capacity to create misery. Their collective fear grew stronger after every war, every genocide, and every natural disaster that brought their houses crumbling down." His eyes grew predatory as he recollected much scarier, violent times in human history.

"So you awoke?" Mathilda whispered. "And preyed on us."

He smiled cheekily. "Pretty much."

"And now you want me to return you to Derry so you can resume your reign of terror?" Mathilda shoved past him and pivoted on her heels to face his direction again. "Well, I refuse."

"Wrong answer." His voice briefly returned to its gravelly, gritty pitch. Robert closed the distance between them in two long strides and grabbed her neck, pulling her up to his face. "I know what you fear, Tilly, and I can still rip down your barriers and consume every ounce of you."

"You're just a man." Mathilda said defiantly.

"Yeah," his eyes narrowed. And without another breath he lifted her by the throat and pushed her hard against the wall opposite the coatrack. Mathilda flailed her arms, trying desperately to connect with his face, but he was too agile. She shrieked in horror as Robert bit down on the sensitive skin above her clavicle, drawing blood. Her scream pierced his sensitive human ears.

He roughly placed Mathilda on her feet and ripped her shirt open. "Oh God, please don't!" she begged, nearly dissolving into hysterics. Robert leaned in, using his lower half to keep her upright.

"This is what you fear Tilly," he began to lap up the blood from her collarbone. "That's why you fantasize about being the big ol' dinosaur, the crafty fox, the blood craving carnivore." Her eyes went wide and welled up. "You just can't handle being helpless." Their eyes connected and Mathilda's arms went slack. His eyes had lost their gentle green hue, and glowed a bright amber. 'Oh no,' she whispered,

realizing that his inner beast was triggered by her fear. Mathilda had to calm down or she'd accidentally bring the clown back.

"What's so damn special about Derry, Maine?" she asked, breaking Robert's concentration. His eyes hardened, but began to dim as he spoke. "I have a reputation there; those hapless local yokels know me and they fear me." He pursed his lips, waiting for her to unwittingly reveal her motive. "Will you stay in Derry if I return you?" She'd have to play along to keep him from terrorizing her. Mathilda resolved to better understand this strange creature en route to Derry so maybe, just maybe she could defeat him at the source.

"For at least another few centuries. Scout's honor." He answered and backed away, allowing Mathilda room to move. She retrieved her laptop, plopped on the couch and ordered two non-stop tickets to Derry's small two-runway airport. In case the worst should occur, she didn't purchase a return flight for herself just yet. "We're set to leave tomorrow evening at 6 pm," she announced.

"Wonderful!" Robert smiled widely and clapped his hands together. "Wait," Mathilda interrupted his revelry. "You'll need to wear something besides a towel. And I have no idea what sizes your shirt, pants, or shoes are." He shrugged. "The last time I wore plain clothes, every article was hand-stitched and tailored to fit my dimensions. "Okay, I guess I'll pick out a couple outfits tomorrow morning. I need a few toiletries for the trip, myself."

When Mathilda rose to begin her bedtime routine, she faltered, stumbled forward and caught herself on the coffee table. She was fatigued, and dizzily pleased that two days of battling a demonic clown finally came to a surprisingly affable end. "I'm sorry." She mumbled, stifling a yawn. She trudged past a blank-faced Robert, who was neither practiced at showing, nor feeling empathy for others' discomfort. "I'm a supreme being and I've yet to become faint." He said as she headed towards the lofted bedroom.

"Would your supremeness care for Domino's Pizza?" Mathilda responded without looking back.

An hour later Mathilda sat on her bed slack-jawed – her face twisted in disgust at the smacking and slurping sounds coming from Robert

as he chewed another peperoni slice with his mouth wide open. Saliva dribbled down his chin and he snapped his fingers to request yet another glass of grape soda. "Mmmmm" His eyes rolled back and he shivered from the pure unfiltered pleasure of tasting a buttery cinnamon stick for the first time. 'He's still the same clown,' Mathilda reminded herself.

With two empty pizza boxes on the nightstand and Robert's hunger satiated by something other than unbridled fear, Mathilda was faced with the uncomfortable logistics of their sleeping arrangements with a single queen-sized bed. Well, she was until Robert yanked back the comforter, dove under the crisp sheets and dramatically fluffed the pillow behind his head. "Being human has its perks," he sighed contentedly.

"Where will I sleep?" She tested the waters, hoping they weren't shark infested. "In the bed beside me if you wish. After all, it wouldn't be the first time we've slept in a room together." Robert grinned, sleepily. His eye lids grew heavy. "Tilly, I have no desire to ruin my chances of returning home." After turning out the lights, she warily slid under the covers beside him and watched his eyes close. She eventually relaxed into the warm blankets, but didn't turn her back to him.

A few moments later something stirred in Robert and he rolled over to face her. "Tilly? Tilly? Can I try something?" he whispered. "Depends." Mathilda responded in the darkness. She felt his long arm make its way around her waist and he gently pulled her forward onto his chest. She stiffened at the unexpected display of affection, but rationalized that he merely acted on impulse instead of meaningful feelings.

"This is contentment." He sighed. "This is fullness."

For the first time in his immortal life, he wasn't hungry.

Mathilda was taken aback by the sudden pillow talk, but she welcomed any side of him that wasn't sadistic or murderous. She looked up at him. His sharp cheek bones were accentuated by the soft glow of the city lights filtering in through the windows above the staircase. It made him seem more human. "When did you commission

that portrait?" Mathilda asked, but when he didn't immediately respond, she wished she had just swallowed her question.

"When I worked as a stage hand for *Oscar's Traveling Circus Sideshow Extravaganza*." He giggled at the memory. "So, you were actually human then." Mathilda shifted to rest her head in the crook of his shoulder.

"I traveled with the circus sideshow because humans have always feared what they don't understand. And people didn't understand a lot back then. Conjoined twins, a bearded lady, the man with webbed feet. Audiences were frightened and repulsed by medical conditions and their shock was easy to exploit. Eventually I created my own caricature to feast on their sumptuous fear... *Pennywise the Dancing Clown*. Had my own stage wagon and everything." As he spoke, Robert unconsciously drew lazy circles on her arm with his fingers.

"How did you avoid getting caught? Weren't there reports and posters of missing people?" Mathilda asked. "Nope." He replied, "that's the beauty of a traveling circus. You're always on the move. At least, I was until I found Derry." His conversational tone shifted from light hearted to sinister.

Mathilda visibly shuddered at the thought of him brutalizing an entire town, especially since she'd be there tomorrow night. Her racing thoughts were temporarily allayed when she felt Robert nuzzle her hair as he dozed off. She snaked her arm around his torso and squeezed before sleep claimed her too.

5. Fear at 36,000 Feet

The Boeing 737 banked left and gradually leveled out from its steep incline, having departed from Seattle's SeaTac airport at 6:20 pm. "We have now reached a cruising altitude of 36,000 feet. You may unbuckle your seat belts and move freely about the cabin," the captain announced with the same exaggeratedly confident drawl and vocal fry that all pilots possess.

Mathilda anticipated that getting Robert past the security checkpoint without proper identification would be arduous if not impossible, thereby prematurely ending their journey and inadvertently saving the town of Derry. Win-win.

As they inched through the winding line to check their "luggage" consisting of a single coatrack and a smallish travel bag containing his belongings, Mathilda fumbled with her hands. 'This isn't going to work.' She mumbled under her breath. She feared Robert's reaction when he finds out he's grounded in Seattle.

"Next person in line please!" They approached the counter and Mathilda nearly fainted in anticipation of Robert being denied a boarding pass. "I'll need one piece of identification and your ticket confirmation number." Mathilda handed the attendant her printed confirmation code and driver's license. "Sir?"

"Oh yes, of course!" Robert reached into his coat pocket, fumbled around and produced an official looking piece of identification. He handed over the ID and the attendant lowered her glasses to study it, glancing back at him dubiously. "Thank you, Mr. Skarsgard."

She handed it back to Robert and proceeded to print the tags for their luggage. "How many carry-ons do you have?" Mathilda could only manage to croak out her answer. "Ummm, just two items." She was stupefied. After the brief transaction, the pair made their way to the security check point.

"How on earth did you...?" Her words failed her. Robert glanced down and smiled broadly. Her agitated state had reinvigorated his

power just enough for him to create the illusion of an ID card. "You're unreal," she whined in mock indignation. "Oh, I'm very real." He responded, making eye contact.

Mathilda slumped back in her cramped airline seat and released an audible sigh of relief; her troublesome row-mate could finally redirect some of his manic energy to irritating the other passengers in rows 7A-21F. "Look at the tiny lights!" Robert squealed in delight and excitedly grabbed her arm again, pointing towards the quickly fading city through the haze of feathery clouds.

Robert had reverted to a clown-like joy as soon as he set eyes on all the dining options at the airport. He was flabbergasted with the knowledge that he could have popcorn, pizza, and a chocolate sundae cake all in the same place. And now he had a first-class, or rather coach-class, ticket for his very first ride aboard the humans' "areoplane."

A tall, willowy uniformed woman in her mid-20s approached the pair wheeling a heavy trolley overfilled with refreshments. "Would you care for some peanuts, chips, or cookies sir." Thank goodness, a welcome, although temporary distraction. Robert's eyes and smile went wide. "Peanuts, please!" His green irises sparkled at the flight attendant and she responded with a coquettish giggle and a flirty wink under her heavy mascara. Her smile faded when she noticed Robert's arm interlinked with Mathilda's.

"And you?" she asked with a subtle scowl, raising her eyebrow at Mathilda, who deliberately responded impassively, not wanting to provoke her ire and jealousy. A pulsating electric current vibrated across his skin and Robert could feel the tension between the two women. And as if a faulty wire caught fire, he smelled the familiar scent of Mathilda's intense fear of confrontation with complete strangers. He clicked his tongue and the cabin lights ominously flickered off and on.

"Cookies, please," she responded sheepishly looking down at her lap, avoiding eye contact. The flight attendant casually tossed the cookie packet at Mathilda, but Robert caught it midair, opened the wrapper, and handed the contents to Mathilda without breaking eye contact

with - he glanced at her name badge. "Brenda, is it?" he chuckled.

This time his glare matched hers.

"Yes," she immediately perked up hearing her name spoken from behind his full pink lips. Robert looked her up and down. He instinctively responded to the gentle tug of her psyche and after a few seconds of rummaging through her thoughts, he smiled knowingly. "I'd like a tour of the plane." He responded with fake gentlemanly politeness. Robert quickly unbuckled himself and rose from his seat without waiting for her response.

"Oh, um, of course." Brenda was taken off guard. "Excuse me, she beckoned another attendant, "could you take over serving the remaining rows?" Robert squeezed his tall frame into the aisle and took the woman by the small of her back, leading her to the back of the plane toward the galley and lavatory.

Mathilda was left alone with her thoughts and her chocolate cookies. The plane suddenly dipped down and Mathilda squinted out the round window at the gray storm clouds looming. She heard the first crack of lightening and looked sideways over the seat, searching for Robert.

Robert roughly shoved Brenda forward into the empty kitchen and closed the curtains behind them. Brenda slinked against the far wall, sensing that something was off. The combined smells of stale coffee and her anxiety assaulted his nose. "You're frisky," Brenda nervously laughed with false bravado. He blocked her exit and approached her slowly.

The plane jerked more violently this time, rattling the windows; passengers around Mathilda were becoming increasingly alarmed. The fasten seatbelt sign illuminated with a 'ding' as the captain's staticky voice projected over the intercom, instructing passengers to immediately take their seats and fold their tray tables upright. "We've encountered a sudden bout of rough turbulence. Crew members please secure any food trolleys and..." The message was interrupted by the plane free falling 20 feet as it entered an unseen air pocket within the storm.

A few scattered screams were heard throughout the coach section of the cabin and the realization of the very real danger their terror would put everyone in dawned on Mathilda like a cold ice cube down her back. "Oh God, they have to calm down." She whispered to herself.

Robert inhaled deeply, brazen with renewed strength as he grinned evilly at Brenda. "How will you ever be anything worthwhile if you can't be anything more than a little bitch?" he said just loud to be heard over the drone of the aircraft's engines.

"Wwwhat?" Brenda blinked back tears, remembering those exact words screamed in her face more than 10 years ago. She quickly blotted her eyes with her sleeve, but when she looked back up, she was staring into the cataract-clouded bloodshot eyes of her late grandmother. A spiteful woman she nicknamed 'Evil-ene.'

"Brenda the bitch, Brenda the bully!" the shriveled weasel of a woman spat back.

"You're dead!" Brenda wailed, "You're supposed to be dead!" She backed up into the stove, crying hysterically. On the floor below where she stood was a small puddle of urine.

The commotion behind the curtain didn't go unnoticed from passengers closest to the galley. Murmurs of a stewardess crying evolved into to a full-blown panic within minutes. "Why won't you tell us the truth? Is this plane going down?" A man cornered a flight attendant who was pleading with him to take his seat amid the chaos of drinks, laptops, and other belongings being overturned into the aisles from the plane's erratic movements. "Sir, please calm down and sit down or I will have you restrained." She said.

Mathilda's head was in her hands and she was growing increasingly worried for Robert to return as, well, Robert. Her flicker of hope was abruptly extinguished when she heard the loud cackle from the plane's rear. "AhAHAAAAaHaHaHaaa!" It reverberated throughout the cabin and she immediately regretted her decision to check Robert's belongings rather than carry the picture with her. Now there was no way to reel him in.

The cabin lights went dark for nearly 15 seconds and Mathilda's nightmare was magnified when the power returned. First, a heavyset man nursing his inhaler shrieked, convinced that a gremlin was on the wing, removing the bolts and panels.

Another passenger dangerously attempted to open the overhead compartment above his seat, and a tropical assortment of venomous snakes dropped onto him and slithered off in every direction. Passengers clamored and climbed over one another, trying to escape towards the front of the plane.

Mathilda steadied her breathing and reminded herself that these were hallucinations to heighten their fear. It was only a matter of time before the pilots themselves would succumb to the clown's antics. The aisle was strewn with debris, but Mathilda quickly tried to make her way to the source of the maniacal laughter. Suddenly an explosion rocked the plane and threw her forward on her face. She looked up through blurred, double vision and saw the clown excitedly waving to her.

She rose shakily and used the arm rests to steady herself as she strode up to him.

"Pennywise, STOP!" She yelled with balled fists at her sides. "You're going to bring the whole plane down if you continue."

"Tilly," he teased, "sometimes you have to stumble and fall from great heights before you can float...aallll the way up to heaven!" Pennywise's smile dropped and he lunged at Mathilda, using his full weight to push her unto the carpeted floor behind the last row of seats.

He growled and made chomping noises, playfully threatening to bite off her nose. Mathilda pushed back against his chest in vain. "Stop it, stop it, stop it, stop..." she screamed in rhythm with each kick against his long legs. Pennywise loved to play with his food and Mathilda gave one last shriek before she went limp. Her head hit the floor in resignation to her fate. This is how it ends. Pennywise's eyes started to spread farther apart in preparation for his sharp incisors to extend.

No. Not now. Not like this.

Acting on impulse, Mathilda grabbed Pennywise's face and pulled him down flush against her, locking him in place with her legs firmly around his hips. Her lips crashed against his and her fingers interlocked around the nape of his neck. He fiercely resisted by pulling at her arms, but Mathilda found the strength to hang on with everyone's life on the plane at stake. She changed tactics and nuzzled his neck, nipping around his ear. She was rewarded with a guttural moan and the feeling of his member growing against her thigh.

He gently lifted her chin and they locked eyes. "Please." Mathilda whimpered. It was a gentle plea. "I know you're inside there somewhere Robert. Please come back to me."

6. Figment of Your Imagination

"Come back to me..." Her voice broke and if he had a heart, it would've broken too. Mathilda let out a shaky sob and raised her head, burying her face in the crook of his neck for a second time, inhaling the scent of clean linen and cinnamon on his starched ruff. Pennywise cupped the back of her hair bun and gently nuzzled her damp forehead with his painted nose, panting softly.

He laid her head down on the carpeted floor and, parting his lips, he covered hers in a warm kiss. His pointed incisors dulled and he bit down softly on her lower lip. Mathilda responded by rocking her hips against his groin. Gently at first, but sped up and increased the friction between them as he devoured her mouth.

Mathilda broke the kiss momentarily and tried to roll them both over so she could take the reins, but he planted his hands firmly on her shoulders and pushed her back down with a light thud; his body was heavy atop hers, restricting her movement just enough to remind her who was in control.

Mathilda stared into his dark blue eyes, silently begging for permission to continue. He nipped at her nose again, this time lovingly. And she moved her right hand between them, and then down his long torso to fumble with the ties and buttons that fastened his intricate costume at the crotch.

Once she finally freed his hard member, she rhythmically stroked him using the precum on the tip to moisten her ministrations. Pennywise gasped and closed his eyes tightly, lost in the intimate moment. "Need more." He choked and Mathilda pulled down her jeans and underwear to accommodate his request. She awkwardly positioned him at her entrance, and with a little adjustment for size, fully sheathed him.

He jostled her with his sudden thrusts forward. Mathilda sucked her teeth at the sharp pain and focused her eyes directly above him to anchor herself in the moment. Her eyes deceived her. The suitcases, laptops, and clothes that fell from the overhead compartments were floating around them, upwards and safely back into their original

storage areas.

Everything seemed to move in reverse as food carts stood again, fully stocked with appetizers and glass shards refashioned themselves into coffee pots. Liquids defied gravity, retaking the shape of their containers.

Despite his rapid pace, Mathilda could feel the plane cease to rumble and level out beneath her, flying once again at a safe altitude. She glanced at the window nearest them to see the storm clouds dissipate and make way for a clear starry sky.

Pennywise yanked her hips forward, forcing her to arch her back. She held onto his shoulders, feeling him flex and shudder. Suddenly her core felt warm as he came. No, it felt hot like the glow of an incandescent lightbulb. In his lifetime, he'd consumed souls and feasted on the happy memories of his victims, but nothing came close to this feeling of raw pleasure and bliss.

His grip tightened and they both shone bright radiant orange. When the light faded, Mathilda floated back to Earth.

"Did I hurt anyone?" Robert groaned. He was naked, confused and drenched in sweat. "I, I don't know." Mathilda responded, still breathless. He untangled himself from her arms and sat up gingerly on his knees, pulling out in the process. And without warning, he leaned forward and embraced her body – still unclothed from the waist down. "My brave and daring Tilly." His voice tinged with admiration, but his eyes hinted at fear.

"Wait, you have to do something about the rest of the passengers." Mathilda said, coming to her senses. She scrambled to put back on her clothes. "They barricaded themselves in first class to escape the snake hallucination. I'm not sure what happened after that..." Robert shushed her, inhaled deeply and closed his eyes to concentrate. He waved his hand in the air and smirked at Mathilda. "They've forgotten everything, now help me find some clothes before they make their way back."

Mathilda rested her head on Robert's warm shoulder for the remainder of the uneventful flight. Crew members and passengers

alike were in a haze, suffering from a Pennywise induced hangover. "Would you like a soda, water, or cup of coffee?" Brenda asked Robert cheerily. Her makeup irreparably smudged and hair disheveled. Mathilda stifled a laugh. "No thank you." He answered without looking her way.

Robert sighed with contentment and concentrated on the feel of Mathilda's hair against his cheek. He looked down at her form, committing every strand of hair, every skin imperfection, and every detail of her clothes to memory. His smile waned and he grasped her hand tightly – and held it to his chest.

"How do you know the townspeople of Derry will remember you?" she mumbled against his arm. "They'll remember." He responded, matter-of-factly. "Once I set foot on Derry soil, all the adults in the town will be under my complete control."

"Oh." Mathilda sat pensively thinking of a failsafe plan to stop him without harming the man she was growing to adore. Her thoughts were interrupted by the captain's announcement.

"Please fasten your seatbelts as we begin our twenty-minute descent into Derry, Maine. It's been a pleasure flying with..." His voice faded away as Mathilda's heartbeat quickened and started drumming in her ears louder and louder.

'This is it and I don't have a plan.' She took two deep mindful breaths.

As the two disembarked, Robert held Mathilda closely. They made their way to baggage claim and retrieved their luggage. While walking through the terminal, a loud clap of thunder stopped Mathilda in her tracks.

She looked up at Robert. "I swear it's not me this time." He laughed. In that moment the clouds above released a torrent of rain and drenched all of Derry. Mathilda gazed at the rain droplets falling and sliding off the airport's skylights.

"Hey," Robert chuckled, pointing at a lone airport news stand. "I'd really like a fizzy cola." Mathilda dutifully ran over to the vendor and made her purchase, unaware of Robert's progression towards the exit.

When she turned around he was gone, and so was their luggage. "Robert!" She shouted. Her head was spinning.

Mathilda ran to the small airport's double doors, leading outside onto the parking lot and adjoining grassy field where bored cops often camped out on slow days to watch the planes take off. She spotted him standing on the other side of the sliding door, looking out at the town. His town.

He looked broken and miserable. "Robert?" She tried the doors, but they wouldn't budge. "Let me through, damnit!" He looked up at her with heavy lidded eyes and the doors slowly inched open. She sprinted out onto the pavement, but as soon as her foot touched the ground, she remembered. 'Oh god. What have I...' Mathilda's eyes turned a cloudy white. She nearly stumbled, but Robert caught her.

"You're going to book another flight to Portland, Maine. Visit your late aunt's house; that creepy old shack is still on the market." He teased, "I know a great real estate agent who will gladly sell it to you. How much money do you have in your pockets?"

"\$42.50" Mathilda responded blankly.

"Good, he'll sell it to you for half that amount. Take my belongings and put them back in my room." Robert placed both hands on either side of her face and kissed her. "Remember, I 'm not real. All that Pennywise is." He paused, "all that I am is merely a figment of your overactive imagination. Nothing more."

"Now, go."

7. Sleep Now

"Remember, I 'm not real. All that Pennywise is...All that I am is merely a figment of your overactive imagination. Nothing more." Robert planted a soft kiss atop Mathilda's forehead and enveloped her in his warm arms for one last embrace.

He knelt before her and buried his face in her neck, prolonging the only hug he's ever bestowed on a human. When Robert released her, he held a perfectly round red balloon; the long white string was nimbly suspended between his thumb and index finger.

Robert's eyebrows furrowed as he debated whether to relinquish his gift to her. He searched her eyes for an answer and without finding one, he gave in.

He tied the string around her wrist and stood.

"Now go."

Robert inhaled sharply and took two steps backward, but Mathilda stood still, unmoving and unwilling to break eye contact.

Placing both his hands between her shoulder blades, Robert ushered her back through the doors with a gentle nudge forward. When she stepped into the airport, the slight pressure on her back was gone, as was Robert.

Mathilda stared ahead, unblinking with glassy eyes that no longer resembled their vibrant hazel brown hue. Her feet dragged beneath her like concrete blocks as she trudged back to the main terminal. Her mind was hazy and she could just barely focus her thoughts well enough to complete the task ahead of her.

"Hi," Mathilda held up a robotic hand to the impish, bespectacled information desk attendant. "Hey, how may I help you?" He inquired, keenly eyeing her bright balloon, bobbing up and down as she searched her pockets for her identification card.

"I would like to purchase a one-way ticket to Portland, Maine." She

responded without inflection.

"Sure thing, I can complete that transaction right here." But before Mathilda could produce her ID card or currency, the attendant handed her a freshly printed boarding pass. "One ticket to Portland's International Airport. The next plane leaves in one hour so you might be able to catch it if you hurry to the boarding area. Your baggage will be transferred without charge. Enjoy your flight, Tilly." The attendant smirked.

"Thank you." She squeaked, and made her way to Boarding Area E to find a seat amongst the mostly occupied chairs. Noticing the hapless woman standing alone, a youngish college kid removed his overstuffed backpack from the seat next to him and waved, motioning her over.

"You just come from the carnival?" He laughed, playfully pulling at the balloon's string as Mathilda sat down beside him. When she didn't respond, he cleared his throat. "I'm Alex, and I'm sorry if I caused offense." He chuckled nervously. "I'm a senior at the University of Derry and I've apparently forgotten how to converse in the outside world."

"I'm, um, I'm Mathilda," she stuttered.

"Are you sure?" Alex teased. Mathilda settled into her seat.

"I'm not really sure why I'm here." She looked at him with large, sad eyes. Even though her irises were clouded over, he could see her confusion and pain. Misinterpreting her answer as cry for help, Alex flexed his empathy muscles as a recently hired resident advisor.

"We're all here for a reason, Mathilda." He patted her shoulder. "For instance, what's your reason for visiting old Derry? You don't look like you're from around here and it's not exactly a touristy place."

"I...I have to go to Portland...to buy a house and..." She trailed off.

Mathilda frowned as an image of a handsome, tall man flashed in her mind for a sliver of a second.

(flashback)

"I saved lives by weakening your power!" Mathilda sobbed before she stilled and turned her head to the side, resting her wet cheek on the smooth ceramic; the emotion behind his eyes made him appear all the more frightening and she couldn't face him. "You, you, what?" Robert spat, "You can't even save yourself!"

"No, um, I think I have to stop something bad. Something evil from getting here." Alex leaned back in his seat, wary and unsure of how to respond to her bizarre answer.

She roughly massaged her temple with both palms.

"I've got to remember." Mathilda said, fervently. Again, an image of man impregnated her thoughts. Mathilda released a shaky breath and held on tight to that memory. He had wide expressive eyes and soft pink lips. Lips that suddenly and grotesquely grimaced and turned blood red. The color from his lips bled onto his white cheeks forming two parallel lines that extended up to his bulbous brow ridge, accentuating a sinister smile. He laughed. No, he cackled shrilly and Mathilda's body spasmed as she recalled how terrifying this entity can be.

Amid her racing thoughts, the balloon suddenly popped, loudly. Mathilda was jarred back to the present and the white cataracts over her eyes receded. All at once she regained her memories of Robert and his malevolent alter ego.

"Pennywise!" She screamed, stood and sprinted towards the exit.

'Please take me to him,' she prayed silently to no one in particular.

"Pennywise!" His chosen name, one of many, echoed through his mind – momentarily stopping him dead in his tracks and giving his prey a chance to escape through the labyrinthine sewer tunnels. The sobbing ten-year-old boy stumbled over his feet as he splashed through the murky water, trying to find his way back to the storm drain from which he was snatched.

Pennywise snarled, drool cascading down his mouth and collecting beneath his chin. He craned his head towards the noisy street above, a mere two blocks east from Derry's quaint airport. "She's retrieved

the memories I tucked away in her balloon." He giggled. His shrill voice betrayed his awe and alarm at how quickly she'd foiled his plan.

Pennywise anticipated that she'd figure it out on the flight en route to Portland. By that time, he would have feasted enough to satiate his hunger and regain his full strength. She'd return to the bones of his victims. He lingered on the warm thought that she'd eventually come back to him.

He refocused just in time to see the boy turn a dark corridor right below Main Street. Pennywise disappeared and materialized in front of him. The boy skidded to halt and took a sudden right down another path. His frantic cries echoed through the tunnels, reaching the deft ears of a panicked Mathilda. By some miraculous chance she was running directly above him, searching for clues to Pennywise's whereabouts.

She paused after hearing a distressed, disembodied voice beneath her feet. "Hello?" Mathilda cried out. "Who's there?"

"I'm down here! Please help!" He screamed. "There's a big scary clown chasing me."

Mathilda spun on her heels looking for an access point to the sewers. She spotted a manhole cover fifteen feet ahead near the intersection of Main and Neibolt Street. "Can you see the light filtering through the storm drain lid in front of you?" Her question was met with silence.

"Hello!?" She continued. No answer. "I'm coming down to get you, ok." Mathilda kneeled over the cover and squeezed her fingers through the grubby slates. She gripped hard and tugged with all her strength. In a few seconds the heavy metal cover creaked as it made a lethargic lurch, uncovering the hole.

She hoisted the hefty cover to the side. Mathilda lost her grip of its slimy surface dropped it onto the pavement. The heavy clang rang in her ears. 'I'm sure that went unnoticed.' She climbed down the precarious ladder, dropping the last few feet with an unceremonious splash; the putrid smells wafted up as she disturbed the water. She

squinted into the darkness. The path was dimly illuminated by the overcast light above her.

She looked around, but the boy was nowhere to be found. "Hey, are you alright?!" She was answered by a breathy giggle off to the corner caught. "For fucks sake let him go, Pennywise!" She shouted towards the source of the eerie laughter.

Pennywise emerged from the shadows holding the sniffling, terrified boy three feet above the water by his slender neck. His soggy sneakers kicked wildly in response to Mathilda, whose voice promised a slim chance for escape. "Please help," he choked out, grabbing at Pennywise' hands.

Pennywise' eyes glowed a pure bright orange. His numerous incisors jutted from his impossibly large mouth. "I'm fully restored, little Tilly." He smiled through his teeth. 'He's gone,' she despaired. "There's no need for his silly trinkets anymore."

Mathilda's voice caught in her throat. She somehow knew the daring stunt she pulled on the airplane wouldn't bring Robert back this time, but she couldn't leave the boy to his fate. How many other innocent children had fallen victim to Pennywise while she was hypnotized? Mathilda shuddered at the thought and hastily concocted an equally foolish plan to save the child.

Mathilda rushed forward, barreling towards the two figures. Before she could reach them, Pennywise receded into the shadows. 'Damn, I'm going to lose them!' She lunged for the boy's leg and missed, but plummeted forward landing headfirst in the wastewater.

Mathilda coughed and gagged when she emerged. She frantically rubbed the grime from her eyes and gasped at what she saw.

She found herself in the belly of the beast. In the center of this bright cavernous room was an impossibly large pyramid piled high with broken toys, fetid clothes, and personal affects that had rusted and disintegrated over the years. And directly above it...Mathilda's hands covered her mouth, which twisted in horror.

Half-consumed bodies of tots, children and teenagers floated counter-

clockwise high above her. And no more than twenty feet in front of where she knelt was a carnival wagon and dilapidated stage.

Standing amongst the aged props was Pennywise, biting into the boy's shoulder. "Get away from him!" Mathilda charged the stage, knowing what would happen. Pennywise ripped a chunk of skin from his flailing arm and dropped him with an awful 'thud' on the dusty floorboards at his red tasseled shoes. The boy moaned in pain. 'Good, he's still alive.' Mathilda climbed up the stage's apron and screamed as she raised her shaky fist ready to strike Pennywise' jaw, but it never connected with his face.

The air seemed to rush from the windy chamber. The only sounds were Mathilda's ragged breaths as she struggled to inhale. All at once Pennywise remembered himself and as if shaking off a trance, he looked down and released a horrid shriek. He'd impaled her torso – her lungs – with his werewolfesque claws.

He retracted his morphed hand and Mathilda fell forward onto Robert's rigid upper body. All that was Pennywise once again melted away. His chest vibrated with suppressed sobs that threatened to burst through his quivering lips. Robert struggled for words. "Tilly... I..."

He picked her up bridal style. His wide eyes were bloodshot and wet with tears. Thankfully they were hidden by several wispy locks of hair.

Mathilda's head lobbed to the side as she looked for the little boy through heavy lidded, tired eyes. He must've limped away to freedom amid the commotion.

"I got you back, Robert." She coughed, trying to smile. "Shhhh, sleep now Tilly." He soothed. The color drained from her skin and she felt heavier in his arms.

Mathilda stopped breathing.

Robert stared at the small form laying still against his broad chest. He saw the defiant young girl with the fantastical imagination and he saw the brave woman she grew up to be. She was determined to

prove he was real even if that endeavor proved fatal. She saved an innocent life, but she couldn't save herself.

Robert kissed her forehead and raised his head up towards the light. He sighed deeply, closed his eyes and steadied himself. Then Robert tenderly released her; his fingers lingered against her still warm skin as she slowly floated upwards. Mathilda rose higher, not to join the revolving bodies and debris, but to rest suspended in the middle – peaceful and intact.

He decided it was time for Pennywise himself to go into hibernation. Robert wiped away his tears and headed off towards the well. From time to time years thereafter he watched her and for a fraction of a second, remembered his humanity.